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# READING VERSUS TRANSLATING

## II. METHODS

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My previous paper on this subject<sup>1</sup> has been taken by some readers to be a plea for the oft-exploded "natural method" of teaching the foreign language entirely without the aid of the mother tongue; it certainly was not so intended. Nothing could be more *natural* and thrifty than to use the language already familiar to both teacher and learner in acquiring a new one. But *as soon as possible* discard the help of the mother tongue; get rid of its intermediary function, and let the learner's mind deal with one language and the thought conveyed by it, as he does when he speaks, reads, hears, his childhood language.

I cannot refrain from harking back to the theme of the previous paper with an anecdote. A bright student of Greek—who has since distinguished himself in college and in literary work—was writing into Greek the sentence, "The general collected vessels in which to ferry his soldiers across the river;" and for *vessels* he wrote *σκευή*—which of course means *vessels*, but hardly the kind in which Greek hoplites could cross the Euphrates. If the student had been trained to visualize *σκευή* as pots and kettles and the like, and *πλοῖα* as ships and boats, the blunder would have been impossible.

As to method there is, of course, one great thing; that is to insist in every way, and by every means, upon the student's thinking in response to the foreign words and word groups, not English words, but pictures, ideas, things, actions—mental images and concepts. Doubtless the lad should be told in the first place that *gladius* means *sword*; but then he should be instructed and trained to think of a sword, and, moreover, of a Roman sword; in all of which our illustrated texts assist. Tell him in so many words that he is to eject the English word from his mind, and

<sup>1</sup> *School Review*, Vol. XV, p. 508.

that *gladius* is henceforth to call to his mind a particular idea and image, just as any other familiar word does.

This must be done thoroughly at the very outset, so that it may become the first mental habit in the study of the language. Here is where most teachers will fail for lack of faith, for the establishment of this habit will require no little time and effort; but the investment will be repaid with heavy interest in a short time, by the speed and grasp attained. The first words and sentences being simple and usually concrete are adapted to the formation of the habit; let such words and phrases be first clearly understood, then practiced by repetition over and over again, until they gain the power swiftly and certainly to call up the corresponding ideas.

Make sure that each student understands his own responsibility for his own success in this task; no one else can do it for him; the teacher rarely has any other test for a pupil's knowledge of the meaning of a foreign word except the ability to give an English equivalent; the pupil alone knows whether or not he is acquiring the power to think his Latin or German directly into ideas. Impress upon the class the necessity of training their own minds by patient and energetic practice from foreign word into thought. Do not hesitate to spend whatever time seems necessary to make the whole idea clear to every student, and also to impress him with its value; he should understand that the plan involves hard work now, and work upon his own responsibility, but will bear rich fruit later, besides illuminating his language-study from the beginning. The psychic reasonableness of the method will appeal to the student; it is simply an effort to get the same mental processes with Latin that the Roman had who knew no other language.

With the young student visual terms will probably in most cases afford the best material for discussion and drill: Such concrete individual terms as *agger*, *miles*, *hasta*, *equus*, *canis*, *domus*, form the best beginning; from these one goes on naturally to rather more complex ideas, such as *pugna*, *impedimenta*, including verb ideas, such as *currunt*, *oppugnant*; and to abstract ideas, such as *auctoritas*, *virtus*, *cultus*, and the like.

But the largest results are obtained in connection not with single words, but rather word groups, including inflected forms in their appropriate relations. The case endings should be the object of special attention, to the end that the student gain a feeling of the force and possibilities of each case; the right method here is thrown into relief by the utterly false, but not uncommon, method of allowing a pupil to translate an ablative or dative at the beginning of a sentence before he knows what the sentence as a whole means; so that his "by, with, from, to, or for," may be quite wrong. Whatever is true of the case endings is true with added force of the verb inflections for mood, tense, person, and number. All should come to have a distinct value to the mind of the student; for every form he should have an intellectual response.

All forms of speech which differ markedly from the English idiom should receive abundant and special attention. The endless difficulty arising from the accusative and infinitive of Latin indirect discourse might be diminished indefinitely if care were taken at the very outset to make a few simple and typical sentences utterly familiar and transparent: the aid of English is necessary here, not only in a sort of translation, but also in the way of parallel forms in English; such expressions as "I declare him to be the wisest man;" "He believed his son to have been guilty of treason," and the like, may be used to prepare the mind for sensing directly the Latin quotations. Nor may anyone hope to achieve perfection easily in this particular task; constructions so diverse from the usual English idiom are not mastered "except by prayer and fasting" on the part of both teacher and pupil. Regarding the use of English the only caution needed is that common to all processes—let it render its service and then be eliminated, and leave the foreign phrase and the thought in sole possession of the mind.

What is true of the regular or syntactical idioms is no less true of individual idiomatic expressions; they also must be learned to the point of complete familiarity and direct perception. The lack of such comprehension reveals itself in fatal inability to interpret the foreign tongue safely. The translator

of a well-known edition of a German work renders "nichts weniger als" almost verbatim, and consequently as falsely as could possibly be; the student must learn to feel "nichts weniger als" not as "nothing less than" but as its opposite, "anything but." How strong is the power of the word-translating vice is shown by the fact that in the above-cited mistranslation the context demanded the rendering "anything but" beyond the question of a doubt.

Much reading aloud of the foreign language is to be desired; this should be used both with new matter, in which occur words and phrases unfamiliar to the student, and also with passages whose meaning he has mastered; in the former case he will often divine the meaning of new words, and even of the passage as a whole, just as in reading our own language we gather the meaning of a strange word from the context. The reading of familiar passages is an excellent drill and perfecting exercise.

Practice in conversation is one of the most effective instruments for quickening the sense for the new language. Any reasonable competence, in question and answer, even in the simplest matter, is proof of the right kind of mental process, for the speed of spoken language does not permit the slow processes of translation. Our actual achievements in the ancient languages do not stand this test. Granted that no one wants to speak Latin nowadays, in America at least, it is still true that a little practice in using sentences orally will far more than pay for itself in cultivating the power of direct sensing of the Latin. Another successful plan is that of reading an easy passage to the class and requiring them to give the sense of it in their own words, either orally or in writing, and either in English, in the early stages, or in the foreign tongue when that is a reasonable demand. The reading should be rapid enough to make it impossible for the student to turn single words into English equivalents, and compel him to get the sense of the passage as a whole if at all.

Committing passages in the foreign language to memory is also a valuable method; possibly the good old method of learning the rules of syntax in Latin was justified on this score, although

in too many cases the rules were to the learner so much sound without sense. The learning of fine passages of prose and verse, especially those in which the student finds a natural interest, trains the pupil to interpret the foreign tongue, and also furnishes him with a store of words, phrases, idioms, and syntactical material. A certain student, in an endeavor to learn to read Greek, dealt so faithfully with the first three or four pages of the *Anabasis* that he found he could repeat it fluently, although he had never set out to commit it; he maintains that the pages thus acquired were an invaluable aid throughout all his earlier work in the language.

“Prose composition,” both oral and written, has great power to stimulate and enlarge the power to read the foreign language, as many a student can testify. The main reason seems clear, that the task of expressing an idea in the foreign language brings the foreign words—endings, syntax, and idiom—into the focus of attention; the foreign sentence is the object of endeavor and is deeply impressed upon the mind. After a good exercise in turning English into Greek one finds new significance and shades of meaning in the Greek he reads.

In the more advanced stages, the great secret of success is a lively interest in the thought and feeling of what is read and an ambition to know exactly and appreciate fully what the writer has to communicate. To this end let us no longer degrade the masterpieces of ancient and modern poetry, oratory, drama, fiction, and history to be the mere exercises of syntactical verbalism. Who has not heard Homer and Virgil, Xenophon, Goethe, Schiller, and the rest, used as quarries for grammatical questions to such an extent that their splendid thoughts and emotions were entirely lost to the young readers? How can we expect the young scholar to be eager for direct and complete knowledge of the classics when he has never caught a glimpse of their beauty and value?

What of translating in class, which at present has so large a place? First, much less of it, and that much better done; in other words, far less of the pigeon English that ravages so much of the work in foreign languages. The teacher must indeed

satisfy himself that the pupils really understand what they are reading. To a considerable degree the pupil's ability to read a passage aloud with intelligent emphasis and inflection may be accepted as evidence of his comprehension. But this is not infallible; in cases of doubt let the pupil tell in his own words what the sentence means; possibly it may sometimes be necessary to call for a "literal translation;" of this one must only remember that it is, if necessary, a necessary evil, and should be reduced to lower and lower terms as the pupil advances. We need not hope for a higher ideal of translation as an end in itself, until the young translators get a closer view of the real beauty and significance of the literature they are reading; until they come to realize that translation is never a mere matter of exchanging English words for foreign, each for each, but rather a task calling for all they have of fineness of perception and command of English, and until our schools recognize that only the student who can read the foreign sentence without the intervention of English words is ready to deal seriously with the task of real translation. Real translation is one of the most effective of all forms of English composition. How sad that translation so called is actually so often an exercise in *bad* English.